



A Joint Statement on Early Childhood Development and COVID-19: A Call for Coordinated Action to Protect and Support ALL Young Children and Their Caregivers

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. COVID-19 has spread to every corner of the world with national borders closed; travel bans; quarantines; physical distancing; health and education systems overwhelmed; childcare, pre-schools, and schools closed; and the global economy nearly at a standstill. Young children and families are experiencing unprecedented challenges and disruptions to their lives with children at great risk of not reaching their full potential. Now, more than ever, parents and caregivers have a pivotal role to play at the front lines of protecting their children from stress and promoting their development, health, and well-being. This crisis has brought to the forefront the critical role of parenting, as well as the tremendous influence the home environment has on children's lives.

The Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) is a global network of bi-lateral and multilateral agencies, international financial institutions, regional early childhood networks, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, foundations, universities, think tanks, practitioners, and advocates working together and independently to promote the safety, nourishment, health, happiness and learning of ALL children everywhere.

We write this statement concerned about the risks to young children during this crisis of care, protection, and learning and about the longer-term risk of losing the intergenerational social and economic benefits of early childhood development. The early years are a critical window of rapid brain development that lays the foundation for health, wellbeing and productivity throughout life. All children require nurturing and responsive care in a safe and secure environment, including access to healthcare, nutrition, opportunities for early learning, interactions that are developmentally stimulating and emotionally supportive, with protection from threats. The current crisis must not deflect from the global momentum built around investing and supporting multi-sectoral child development in the earliest years of life and its role in expanding human capital for national and global development.

We are concerned about the short term and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on children and their caregivers. Before COVID-19, at least 250 million young children were already at risk of not reaching their full potential. That number is likely to increase exponentially as more people are infected and as more families and communities deal with the socio-economic and the physical and mental health consequences of the crisis. The cost of inaction in the face of COVID-19 will have long term impacts on future human capital.

COVID-19 and the measures taken to prevent its spread most severely affects under-resourced communities and those living in emergency or conflict situations. The challenges of day to day subsistence are exacerbated by the COVID-19 prevention measures that require physical distancing, access to clean water and soap for handwashing and hygiene, and a lack of access to quality health services and affordable technology. Moreover, as the economic effects of the pandemic come into focus, the impact on young children will become more apparent. The most vulnerable children – including those with disabilities, stunted and malnourished, and living in contexts of increased domestic violence – will suffer most. Given the narrow window for early childhood development, the length of the crisis can produce persistent effects in the development of young children.

As the magnitude of this crisis evolves, global solidarity and urgent sustained international collective action and cooperation to mitigate the effect of the virus and its impact on young children and their caregivers is critical.

As a movement supporting the protection and promotion of children's development and the empowerment of families, communities, and early childhood professionals, we will draw on and apply the collective lessons from past pandemics, crises, humanitarian, and fragile contexts.

As champions for young children's health, development, safety, learning and wellbeing, we recognize the critical need to urgently cooperate, coordinate, and collaborate to protect young children and their caregivers in the short term and long term against COVID-19, its direct and indirect effects, future pandemic risks, and the consequences that the current pandemic is having on the social and economic fabric of life, in particular for vulnerable populations.

A Call For Coordinated Action

In consideration of the above, we call on all governments, global partnership, multi- and bi-lateral agencies, political bodies, funders, international non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, the business sector, academia, civil society organizations, networks, and advocates to prioritize the protection and support of young children and their caregivers in the response to and recovery from COVID-19, and maintain investments that support children's health, physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.

In particular, we call for multisectoral collaboration and cooperation action on the following commitments:

1. Put equity and inclusion at the center of the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

Participatory planning, management and humanitarian efforts have shown that responding to young children during crises leads to fewer child deaths, drives economic recovery, improves social cohesion, and encourages the formation of positive social relationships within families and communities.

- Ensure innovative responses and equitable access to basic health services, food, water, sanitation, and accurate information and guidance for all, especially the poorest, displaced, refugee, marginalized, and vulnerable children, including those with disabilities and developmental delays, those affected by conflict, in

remote rural areas, informal settlements, and institutions, those facing acute urban poverty, and belonging to often disadvantaged populations such as ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities.

- Ensure that basic health services and community support structures are funded and continue to be operational for everyone, especially the most vulnerable populations.
- Include the perspective of young children, parents, and other caregivers, and communities in the COVID-19 response and recovery.

2. Support and include parents and other caregivers in the response and recovery efforts.

Parents and caregivers are at the forefront of protecting children and ensuring continuity of care and learning, but many are juggling the challenges of losing jobs, worrying about keeping their children well-nourished and safe, and grappling with increased stress and anxiety and their own health risks. The wellbeing of families, including the health and mental health of parents and other caregivers, is critical to creating enabling environments which can protect the safety and security of children.

- Develop and curate age and ability sensitive materials to support communication on COVID-19 with children, distance learning, including communication strategies to reach those with limited or no access to technology.
- Create virtual parent and caregiver support groups and helplines, including those targeting single headed households, to ensure that mental health and psychosocial support during crises, for all children and their caregivers, is incorporated into the pandemic response.

3. Prioritize child protection. In times of crisis, young children are more vulnerable to abuse, violence, exploitation, stigma, and neglect as their home environments and communities destabilize and parents and other caregivers experience increased stress.

- Strengthen efforts to prevent violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, and other risks to children including appropriate alternative care solutions for children and parents and caregivers affected by the virus, vulnerable parents or those unable to remain in their homes.
- Develop innovative strategies to identify high risk children in close collaboration with parents, teachers, health and community workers and jointly develop support solutions for children at increased risk of separation, including those with disabilities, or those affected by illness or death in the family.

4. Ensure social protection efforts link to health, nutrition, education and childcare services as part of larger social protection initiatives.

- Develop or enhance social protection mechanisms that address the needs of families with young children, including cash transfers, livelihood protection, and nutrition interventions and food assistance during the crisis.
- Promote family friendly policies in the context of the pandemic that specifically address flexible work, paid leave, breastfeeding support, childcare and child benefits.
- Support parents and caregivers with childcare options that are safe and appropriate in the context of COVID-19.

- 5. Protect and support frontline workers who provide child-related services.** Critical frontline workers, including those in childcare, education, social welfare, child protection, health and other community workers, need to be protected during this crisis.
- Arrange for psychosocial support and childcare for frontline workers.
 - Ensure that frontline workers have the knowledge, skills, and resources to focus on children's well-being as well as their health.
 - Provide frontline workers with resources, such as simple, age-appropriate games and activities, to help stimulate children and strengthen the family unit as they respond to the stress and isolation.
- 6. Sustain and grow investments in an integrated approach to nurturing care** to address the needs of children including health and nutrition, education, safety and security, responsive caregiving and early learning. The cost of inaction in the face of COVID-19 will have long term impacts on future human capital.
- Ensure national budgetary allocations for the early childhood development, parenting/caregiver, and mental health programs are not diverted and remain a priority in addition to ensuring continuity of basic health services.
 - Include funding for early childhood development and childcare services in all national COVID-19 responses.
 - Ensure targeted emergency funding is available to provide job security and needs of childcare, early learning centers, and other social services that face enormous financial challenges.
- 7. Develop sustainable pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery capacities at global and national levels that include the protection and well-being of children and their caregivers.**
- Strengthen national and international data collection, analysis, and research capacities to learn more about the impact of COVID-19, including its impact on disadvantaged and young children.
 - Apply what we have learned from past pandemics and emergencies and what we are learning from COVID-19 to strengthen and build more resilient and responsive multi-sectoral systems and services for young children and parents / caregivers.
 - Include the protection and support of young children and their caregivers in national and global preparedness and response plans to address future crises, be they a pandemic or of another nature.

We must act now.

This unprecedented global crisis calls for an agile, coordinated, and unified global effort on behalf of ALL young children, their parents and caregivers, especially the most vulnerable. We must work collectively and in novel ways to adapt, innovate, and continuously learn together in search for equitable and inclusive solutions to the complex and interrelated challenges generated by COVID-19. Join us and grow the global movement for young children, their parents and caregivers to secure a more resilient and promising future.

**This Call for Coordinated Action was developed collaboratively
by ECDAN partners:**

Africa Early Childhood Network

Arab Network for Early Childhood Development

Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood
Development

Catholic Relief Services

ChildFund International

Conrad H. Hilton Foundation

Early Opportunities

Harvard University Department of Global
Population and Health

International Step by Step Association

Lego Foundation

Lunenfeld-Tanenbaum Research Institute at
Sinai Health

Open Society Foundations

Partnership for Early Childhood Development
and Disability Rights

Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and
Child Health

Save the Children

UNESCO

UNICEF

World Bank Group

World Health Organization

World Vision International